



10 Ways to Support Your Child with Anxiety

1. Reign in the Reassurance

Your child is worried. You know there is nothing to worry about, so you say “There’s nothing to worry about!” Unfortunately, it is not that simple.

The reason for this? The fight-or-flight response kicks in when we perceive a threat in our environment. When your child is in this state, reasoning doesn’t help. Their prefrontal cortex (or more logical part of the brain) gets put on hold while the emotional brain reacts. In other words, it is really hard for your child to think clearly and use logic.

What should you do instead of trying to reason the worry away? Try something called the FEEL method (from gozen.com):

- Freeze - pause and take some deep breaths with your child. Science tells us that deep breathing can help reverse this response in the nervous system.
- Empathize - anxiety feels scary to your child, and it helps to be understood. Let your child know that you get it, but try not to overdo the empathy. This can sometimes add fuel to the fire!
- Evaluate - once your child is calm, it’s time use logic to figure out possible solutions.
- Let Go - let go of the situation rather than dwell on it, which can create further anxiety.

2. Teach Them How Worry Can Be Helpful

It is important to teach our kids that worrying does, in fact, have a purpose. When our ancestors were hunting and gathering food there and there was danger in the environment, this fight-or-flight reaction is what kept them safe. If we didn’t react and instead relied on our logical brain (pre-frontal cortex) to think of a solution, we would have been eaten!

In modern times, we don’t have a need to run from predators, but we are left with the same biological system to protect us. Teach your kids that worry is perfectly normal and in fact, it is hard-wired. It can help protect us, and everyone experiences it from time to time.

3. Explain the Brain

It can also be helpful for children to understand all of this. So how do you make this kind of brain education engaging? An idea from *The Whole Brain Child* (Siegel & Bryson, 2012) is to use the metaphor of a house to explain the fight-or-flight response.

In essence, the people who live downstairs (in the limbic system) are the “feeling people”. When there is a potential threat, they are the first-responders on the scene, and this might feel like panic or freaking out! They also alert the rest of our brain about the danger.

The people who live upstairs (in the pre-frontal cortex) are the “thinking people”, and they show up a little later. When they show up, they can work with the first responders to create a plan and think of solutions to the problem.

4. Bring Your Child’s Worry to Life

Believe or not, bringing worry to life and talking about it like a real person can help. Create a worry character for your child (I will do this in session in some way; we call it “externalizing” the anxiety). We name it and note that it lives in the limbic system (or “downstairs”).

Of course, sometimes this character gets a little out of control and when that happens, we have to calm it. You can use this same idea with a stuffed animal or even role-playing at home. Creating a character has multiple benefits. It can help children have a more tangible sense of the worry, so they can battle it.

As well, it can help them move from the reactive state into using their logical brain (pre-frontal cortex). In addition, it’s a tool your children can use on their own, at any time.

5. Teach Your Child to Be a Thought Detective

We now know worry is the brain’s way of protecting us from danger. You may have also heard that teaching your children to think more positively could calm their worries. But the best remedy for distorted thinking is not positive thinking; it’s accurate thinking.

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5. Teach Your Child to Be a Thought Detective (Cont'd)

- **Catch your thoughts:** Imagine every thought you have floats above your head in a bubble (like what you see in comic strips). Now, catch one of the worried thoughts to see what it says.
- **Collect evidence:** Next, collect evidence to support or negate this thought. Teach your child that feelings are, in fact, not facts.
- **Challenge your thoughts:** The best (and most entertaining) way to do this is to teach your children to have a debate within them

6. Schedule Worry Time

As you know, telling your children not to worry won't prevent them from doing so. But allowing your children to worry openly, in limited doses, can be helpful. It can provide a sense of control of the worry, which likely feels beyond their control.

Create a daily ritual called "Worry Time" that lasts 10 to 15 minutes. During this ritual encourage your children to release all their worries in writing and put them away in a box. Then close the box and say good-bye to the worries.

7. Help Them Go From What If to What Is

The human brain is capable of time travel. In fact, when we are anxious, we tend to spend a lot of time in the future. A typical time traveler often asks what-if questions: "What if I can't open my locker and I miss class?" "What if I don't make friends?"

Research shows that coming back to the present can help alleviate this tendency. One effective method of doing this is to practice grounding and breathing exercises. These can bring a child from what if to what is.

To do this, help your child simply focus on their breath for a few minutes. It can be helpful to practice deep breathing often order to incorporate this as a habitual practice in your family.

8. Challenge Avoidance

Often children avoid the activities that create worry. And of course, as parents, we often support them in this avoidance! At first, it seems to make life easier. Unfortunately, in the long run, avoidance actually makes anxiety worse. In other words, anxiety wins – and kids don't get the chance to overcome their worry to see if they actually like an activity.

So what's the alternative? Try making a fear ladder. Help your child confront the task by breaking it down into manageable chunks. Laddering uses this chunking concept and gradual exposure to reach a goal. Let's say your child is afraid of the deep end of the swimming pool. Instead of avoiding this activity, create mini-goals to get closer to the bigger goal (e.g. go to the swimming pool, swim in the shallow end, sit on the side of the pool at the deep end, then put your legs in etc.)

9. Make a Plan

What do trained pilots do when they face an emergency? They don't wing it; instead, they refer to their emergency checklists. Despite years of training, every pilot works through a checklist because, when in danger, it is hard to think clearly (remember that the limbic system kicks in first!) When kids face anxiety, they feel the same way.

To support their logical brain, it can help to have a checklist so they have a step-by-step method to calm down. Think about what you want them to do when they first feel anxiety coming on. If breathing helps them, then the first step is to pause and breathe. Next, they can evaluate the situation. In the end, you can create a hard copy checklist for your child to refer to when they feel anxious.

10. Practice Self-Compassion

When a child has anxiety, it can be painful, frustrating, and confusing for parents. There is not one parent that hasn't wondered at one time or another if they are the cause of their child's anxiety. The good news? Anxiety is attributed to many factors including a genetic predisposition, brain development, temperament, as well as traumatic events and environmental factors outside of your control (for example, bullying).

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10. Practice Self-Compassion (Cont'd)

Remember, you did not cause your child's anxiety, but you can help them overcome it. In order to be able to support your child rather than carry your own worry about their anxiety, practice self-compassion. You are not the problem and your child is not the problem. Rather, it can be helpful to imagine yourself on your child's team, and you are working to triumph over anxiety.

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Notes
